DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 115 CG 018 318

AUTHOR Young, Rosalie F.; And Others
TITLE Definition of Life Stress among Black and White Urban Aged.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (37th, San Antonio, TX, November 16-20, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Blacks; *Older Adults; Perception; *Racial Differences; *Stress Variables; *Urban Population; Well Being; *Whites
IDENTIFIERS Michigan (Detroit)

ABSTRACT

The effects of stress on the psychosocial well-being of older persons have been well documented. Research on stress among the aged has generally considered recent life events as salient stressors in late life and has focussed on older persons without regard to racial differences. Interviews were conducted with 400 elderly black and white residents of Detroit in an attempt to describe the incidence and perception of stressors among the urban elderly. Subjects, who were socio-economically similar, completed measures of recent stressful events, cumulative life stress, and stress due to perception of societal problems. The results revealed that many of the same life crises had occurred among blacks and whites; recent occurrences ranked similarly for blacks and whites; and neither group had experienced many stressful events in the recent past. Whites reported more positive life events than blacks. The results also showed that the races did not perceive events as affecting them to the same magnitude. Whites reported more concern over societal events than did blacks. The elderly of both races were most worried about becoming victims of violent crime and were concerned about the economic condition of the community. (NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED258115

HARD COPY NOT AVAILABLE

DEFINITION OF LIFE STRESS AMONG BLACK AND WHITE URBAN AGED

CG 018318

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Rosalie F. Young

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Rosalie F. Young, Ph.D.
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

Eva Kahana, Ph.D.
Case Western Reserve
Cleveland, Ohio

Boaz Kahana, Ph.D.
Cleveland State Univ
Cleveland, Ohio

DEFINITION OF LIFE STRESS AMONG BLACK AND WHITE URBAN AGED

Rosalie F. Young, Ph.D. Wayne State University Detroit, Michigan

Eva Kahana, Ph.D. Case Western Reserve Cleveland, Ohio

Boaz Kahana, Ph.D. Cleveland State University Cleveland, Ohio

This research was designed to consider diverse aspects of life stress as reported by black and white urban elderly. As part of a longitudinal study investigating the impact of stress on the elderly, the authors sought to describe the incidence and perception of diverse stressors among urban elderly. In this work we have focused on racial differences in reports of experiencing stress and in defining events as stressful. Accordingly, both objective and subjective definitions of stressful life events were considered and several measures of stress were utilized. Major contributions of this research lie in: a) adding to the literature on racial similarities and differences; and b) providing a broader and more comprehensive consideration of stress than that included in most previous studies of stress in late life.

Race has been identified as an important determinant of perceptions, attitudes, and lifestyles for the elderly (Watson & Maxwell, 1977). Studies of racial differences in later life have focused on economic and employment factors (Cox, 1984; Hill, 1978) and on aspects of family life and social suppoort (Arling, 1978; Martin & Martin, 1978; Watson, 1980). The far-reaching effects of stress in affecting psychosocial well-being of older persons have been well documented (Eisdorfer & Wilkie, 1979). However, research on stress among the aged has been generally limited to consideration of recent life even ts as salient stressors in late life and has tended to focus on older persons without respect to their particular racial or ethnic subgroups (Kahana & Kahana, 1983).

Methodology

Results reported here are based on individual interviews with 400 subscribers of the Health Alliance Plan, a Health Maintenance Organization in the

Detroit metropolitan area. All respondents were aged 65 or older and were living in the community at time of interview. Persons were surveyed in their homes by professional interviewers.

1. Measures

To consider objective and subjective definitions of stress, three measures were utilized. First, the Elderly Care Research Center Index of Recent Life Events was used to measure thirty-four recent stressful occurrences. This measure is an age appropriate modification of the Holmes and Rahe Index and measures occurrence of particular events, the amount of readjustment required by the event, and whether evaluations of change engendered by the events are positive or negative. Scores range from 0-34, with respect to occurrence of the events. Internal consistency of the scale is 0.46 according to Cronbach's alpha.

Cumulative life stress was assessed using the Antonovsky Life Crisis Index (Antonovsky, 1979). This instrument measures the occurrence of major stress over the person's lifetime by inquiring about the occurence of 19 specific stressors. Scores range from 0-19, based on occurrence of the events over the person's life history.

A third measure of stress was specifically developed for the present study to consider stress due to perception of societal problems, such as threat of war, discrimination, and potential collapse of Social Security. This latter measure reflects the degree of concern over actual or potential problems in the macro environment. Nine events are presented and concern over each is expressed on a scale of 1-4, whereby 1 indicates that the individual is very concerned, and 4 represents no concern. The Scale values range from 9-36.

2. Sample

The 400 respondents averaged 69 years of age and were 53% male. Nine of ten (91%) were U.S. born. Almost half (46%) were black. Mean annual income was

slightly over $10,000, and 37% had completed high school. Only 6% were presently working. Approximately one-third lived alone (29%), but over one-half (53%) lived with their spouse. Although 19% had no living children, the sample averaged 1.3 children residing in the local area. Few had severely limiting health problems, and less than 10% reported difficulty in performing activities of daily living which involved self care tasks.

Findings

1. Demographic Characteristics of the Races

Among the 216 whites (54%) and 184 blacks (46%) more similarities than differences in demographic characteristics were noted. Racial differences emerged with respect to children, religion, and country of origin. Whites were significantly more likely to have living children, but had fewer children who lived in the immediate area. They were less likely to be Protestant (31% vs. 79% black), and more likely to be foreign born (15% of whites vs. 0.5% of blacks were born outside the U.S.) (See Table 1). During earlier phases of their lives the socio-economic characteristics of the races had differed. Despite similar educational backgrounds (58% of whites and 67% blacks had not completed high school), occupational patterns were quite dissimilar and followed traditional racial patterns. Significantly more blacks than whites (62% vs. 30%) had been employed in unskilled jobs. Two times as many whites (28%) as blacks (13%) had previously held white collar or professional jobs. However, in later life socio-economic characteristics of the races were quite similar. Fewer than one of ten blacks or whites were employed at the time of the interview (5% black, 8% white). Over half of each group lived on annual incomes of less than $10,000 (62% of the blacks and 53% of the whites). Whites were more likely to express discontent with their income levels at late life than blacks, but both groups had

very similar socio-economic profiles at this stage of their lives.

2. Stressful Experiences of the Races

Racial differences in experiencing stress will be considered in the context of similar socio-economic characteristics of this sample. Since race and socio-economic status are often intertwined, the corresponding economic situations of the two racial groups at later life allow us to more clearly tease out life stress of blacks and whties from confounding factors.

Results of the study indicated that the elderly as a whole had experienced relatively few stressful life events during the year immediately preceding the study. The mean number of events experienced was 2.5, based on a possible 34 events contained in the Elderly Care Research Center Index of Recent Life Events. Only seven events occurred among more than 10% of the sample, and just three of these were negatively oriented. They included death of a close friend, death of a family member, and family illness. The other four had a positive orientation and included going on a trip, family celebrations, family achievements, and birth of grandchildren. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that highly stressful events relating to death of a close person were reported by 48% of the sample.

The 34 stressful events comprising the scale were, for the most part, experienced similarly by blacks and whites. Neither group reported many of these events as having occurred to them in the past year. However, there were some significant differences in both number and type of events. The mean number of events reported by blacks was 2.3, while whites reported 2.7. Blacks were also less likely to report experiencing positively oriented events. Thirty-six percent of blacks, contrasted with 49% of whites, had traveled out of town. Family celebrations were mentioned by 24% of whites and 13% of blacks. However, the listing of stressful events occurring to each group indicated very similar patterns (See Table 2). Four of the five most frequently experienced events were

mentioned by both black and white alike (out of town travel, death of a friend, illness of a family member, and family achievement). Among both blacks and whites, out of town travel was the single most frequently occurring experience.

Although whites and blacks indicated occurrence of similar events, their subjective responses to these events showed some racial differences. To illustrate, being a crime victim was among the top ten events occurring that year to persons of both races, but whites indicated significantly more often than blacks that this experience greatly affected their lives. In response to other stressors, blacks were significantly more likely to report great change in their lives from experiencing recent financial problems. Whites who had mentioned problems with children unanimously reported these as having adverse effects, as compared to two-thirds of the blacks.

Consideration of cumulative stress during the life span also yielded both racial similarities and differences. Based on the Antonovsky Life Crisis Inventory, blacks and whites had both experienced more than five serious stressor events out of a possible nineteen. Mean scores for blacks were 5.3, and for whites 6.1. Four events ranked among the five most prevalent stressors among whites and blacks alike: being widowed or divorced; death of a close personal friend or relative; life in danger because of illness; and being out of work (See Table 3). However, there was a major difference in experiencing one crisis event, death or separation from a parent before age fifteen. This event occurred among blacks as one of the top two stressors, but ranked in ninth place among whites. Almost four of ten blacks (39%) had reported absence of a parent before age fifteen, in contrast to less than one of four whites (24%). Three other life crisis events showed significant racial differences: being without food (11% black, 20% white); major financial debt (17% black, 31% white); and losing a job (10% black, 20% white).

Societal Stressors

The third indicator of stress pertained to macro environmental problems. The Index of Societal Stressors assessed the extent to which persons were concerned about nine societal events. This index pointed to consistent and significant differences between the racial groups (See Table 4). Concern for societal problems demonstrated by blacks was significantly lower than that shown by whites. Mean scores were 24.8 for blacks, and 22.1 for whites, with highest scores (maximum 36) representing least concern. Specific events also elicited significant differences in response. Generally, whites were much more troubled about war, nuclear destruction, economic depression, and collapse of Social Security than blacks. Degree of concern among whites ranged from 63%-70% on each of these items. This compared to among 33%-50% of blacks expressing concern about the same societal problems. Interestingly, despite these major differences, both groups were most worried about being the victim of a violent crime (70% white, 63% black). These results confirm findings of previous studies which have indicated that older blacks are fearful of being crime victims (Cox, 1984; Dancy, 1977). In the present research, both races were extremely concerned about crime and its effects on them. Elderly of both races were also greatly concerned by the economic situation prevailing in the community. Fifty percent of the blacks and 63% of the whites considered the economic situation to be an important problem. These findings are readily understood when considered in the community context of the present study. (Michigan has experienced the highest unemployment rates in the U.S. for several years, including the time at which this study was conducted).

Summary and Conclusion

Data presented from the first wave of a longitudinal study of stress among

urban elderly indicate that black and white elderly persons are not very divergent with respect to life stress. Similarities are more the rule than differences. However, where differences occur, they are quite powerful.

Similarities prevailed in both the stress history of respondents and the occurrence of specific events over the preceding year. Many of the same life crises had occurred among both blacks and whites; recent occurrences ranked similarly among the two races; and neither group had experienced a great number of stressful events in the recent past. Although "double jeopardy" is seen as characterizing older blacks in that they are the victims of ageism and racism (Dowd & Bengston, 1978), they may not be more prone than white elderly to the occurrence of specific stressor events.

Among the several noteworthy areas of difference were the following. First, whites report experiencing more positively oriented life events than blacks, which largely accounts for their somewhat greater number of recent life event experiences. Second, attitudinal items showed marked differences in that the races did not perceive events as affecting them to the same magnitude. Third, whites were considerably more likely to express concern over societal events than blacks, particularly in responding to threat of war and problems in the economy.

In view of comparable socio-economic background of respondents, socio-economic factors are not likely to be responsible for observed differences. Although occupations had differences among black and white respondents, both early educational backgrounds and late life economic statuses were quite similar. Therefore, to account for racial differences in stress, existing demographic differences between black and white respondents will be considered. Three which we would like to present pertain to country of origin, differing norms, and family relationships.

The races had differed significantly with respect to place of birth in that

15% of the whites were born outside the U.S. Persons who lived in European countries during either World War I or II would be much more likely to experience hunger and poverty than those who spent their entire lives in the U.S. Our findings with respect to life crisis events seem to confirm this, since hunger was mentioned by twice as many whites than blacks.

Other differences could stem from the normative nature of events. As was shown, blacks and whites were equally likely to be victims of crimes, but whites were considerably more likely to interpret the event in negative terms. Residential patterns resulting from societal racism have found blacks often residing in high crime neighborhoods. However, elderly whites may have escaped the effects of crime at earlier periods of their lives only to encounter it at old age. As a non-normative event, crime may appear more stressful to whites because of lack of prior experience and differential expectations.

To the extent that elderly blacks experience general social conditions and problems as less stressful than do elderly whites, this may serve as a protective function in late life which may in part be responsible for higher morale and lower suicide rates of blacks which have been observed in previous studies of racial differences (Seiden, 1981).

Another important factor concerns the respective roles of white and black elderly within the family. Many references to the differential relationships in black and white families have been extensively documented and underscored. Arling (1978) noted the greater family interdependence among blacks at late life. Mutual aid and assistance are more common among black elderly and their children than among whites. This can account for differential perceptions of family and child-related stressors.

Summing up then, our results demonstrated both divergences and convergences in reporting and appraisal of stress among older blacks and whites. On the one

hand, there appears to be a remarkable consistency in the occurrence of a wide range of present and past life events. On the other hand, attitudinal and macro level items show important racial differences. Thus, these data underscore the potential influence of cultural, ethnic and racial background in affecting world views, perceptions of stress, and the actual experience of stressor events.

Our findings also point to the importance of considering subjective evaluations of stress with actual occurrence of life events. Data analyses are now under way to define how differential perceptions of stress effect psychosocial well-being among the elderly.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Black and White Aged

	BLACK	WHITE
Sex *		
Male	61%	48%
Female	39	53
Marital Status		
Never married	1%	4%
Married at present	56	59
Widowed	38	35
Divorced, separated	2	1
Living Children*		
One or more	74%	84%
None	26	13
Children in Local Area*		
None	8%	22%
One	30	26
Two or more	59	52
Country of Birth*		
U.S.	98%	85
Outside U.S.	1	15
Religion*		
Catholic	4%	54%
Protestant	79	31
Other, none	15	9
Education		
Not high school grad	67%	58%
High school graduate	19	24
Technical, trade, college training	13	18
Lifetime Occupation*		
Homemaker	9%	14%
Unskilled labor	62	30
Skilled labor	17	28
White collar or professional	13	29
Presently Working		
Yes	5%	8%
No	95	92
Present Income		
$9999 or less	44%	37%
$10000-$19999	32	33
$20000 or more	9	13

*Indicates racial difference significant to $P < .05$

Table 2

Rank Order of Recent Life Events

BLACK				WHITE			
Rank	Event	n	%	Rank	Event	n	%
1.	Out of town trip	66	(36%)	1.	Out of town trip	107	(49%)
2.	Death of friend	45	(25%)	2.	Celebration	52	(24%)
3.	Family death	37	(20%)	3.	Death of friend	47	(22%)
4.5	Family illness	32	(18%)	4.5	Family achievement	42	(19%)
4.5	Family achievement	32	(18%)	4.5	Family illness	41	(19%)
6.	Grandchild birth	27	(15%)	6.5	Family death	39	(18%)
7.	Celebration	24	(13%)	6.5	Grandchild birth	38	(18%)
8.	Financial problems	18	(10%)	8.	Victim of crime	21	(10%)
9.5	Victim of crime	15	(8%)	9.5	Grandchild married	18	(8%)
9.5	Personal achievement	14	(8%)	9.5	Other life events	18	(8%)
11.	Personal accident	13	(7%)	12.	Personal accident	15	(7%)
13.	Voluntary retirement	11	(6%)	12.	Trouble with kids	14	(7%)
13.	Divorce - child	10	(6%)	12.	Destruction	14	(7%)
13.	Destruction	10	(6%)	16.	Personal achievement	13	(6%)
15.5	Grandchild married	9	(5%)	16.	Someone moved in	13	(6%)
15.5	Other life events	9	(5%)	16.	Loss of items	12	(6%)
17.5	Loss of items	8	(4%)	16.	Divorce - child	12	(6%)
17.5	Someone moved in	8	(4%)	16.	Voluntary retirement	12	(6%)
20.5	Neighbor troubles	6	(3%)	20.5	Financial problems	11	(5%)
20.5	Someone moved out	6	(3%)	20.5	Neighbor troubles	10	(5%)
20.5	Social Security trouble	5	(3%)	20.5	Stopped driving	10	(5%)
20.5	Spouse death	5	(3%)	22.5	Child married	9	(4%)
24.5	Child married	4	(2%)	22.5	Someone moved out	9	(4%)
24.5	Trouble with kids	4	(2%)	24.5	Change of residence	7	(3%)
24.5	Stopped driving	3	(2%)	24.5	Engaged, married	6	(3%)
24.5	Age discrimination	3	(2%)	27.5	Social Security trouble	5	(2%)
29.5	Engaged, married	2	(1%)	27.5	Marital problems	5	(2%)
29.5	Marital problems	2	(1%)	27.5	Spouse death	5	(2%)
29.5	Change of residence	1	(1%)	27.5	Separation - friends	4	(2%)
29.5	Divorce, separation	1	(1%)	31.5	Gave up handling money	3	(1%)
29.5	Gave up handling money	1	(1%)	31.5	Sold items	3	(1%)
29.5	Sold items	1	(1%)	31.5	Forced retirement	3	(1%)
33.5	Forced retirement	0	(0%)	31.5	Age discrimination	1	(1%)
33.5	Separation - friends	0	(0%)	34.	Divorce, separation	0	(0%)

Table 3

Rank Order of Antonovsky Life Crisis Experiences

BLACK				WHITE			
Rank	Event	n	%	Rank	Event	n	%
1.	Divorce, widow	113	(62%)	1.	Death of a close person	120	(55%)
2.	Death of a close person	106	(58%)	2.	Divorce, widow	112	(52%)
3.	Parent missing age 15	72	(39%)	3.	Life in danger, illness	85	(39%)
4.	No work	71	(39%)	4.	No work	69	(32%)
5.	Life in danger, illness	61	(33%)	5.5	Financial debt	68	(31%)
6.	Major work change	56	(31%)	5.5	Major work change	68	(31%)
7.	Betrayed by other	54	(30%)	7.	Death of sibling	66	(30%)
8.	Death of child	50	(28%)	8.	Betrayed by other	61	(28%)
9.	Death of sibling	44	(24%)	9.	Parent missing age 15	51	(24%)
10.	Financial debt	31	(17%)	10.5	Many responsibilities	46	(21%)
11.	Poor relations at work	30	(16%)	10.5	Death of child	45	(21%)
12.5	Many responsibilities	26	(14%)	12.5	Lose job	43	(20%)
12.5	Bad home	25	(14%)	12.5	No food	43	(20%)
14.	Denied promotion	24	(13%)	14.	Poor relations at work	43	(19%)
16.	No food	20	(11%)	15.5	Denied promotion	37	(17%)
16.	Severe quarrel	20	(11%)	15.5	Bad home	36	(17%)
16.	Wartime experience	20	(11%)	17.	Severe quarrel	33	(15%)
18.	Lose job	18	(10%)	18.	Wartime experience	26	(12%)
19.	Betrayed other	11	(6%)	19.	Betrayed other	14	(7%)

Table 4

Rank Order of Macroenvironmental Stressors Producing Much Concern
Significant Differences Between Groups

BLACK				WHITE			
Rank	Event	n	%	Rank	Event	n	%
1	Violent Crime	116	(63%)	1	Violent Crime	152	(70%)
2	Economic Situation in Detroit	100	(55%)	2	Collapse of Social Security	142	(65%)
3	Collapse of Social	91	(50%)	3	Economic situation in Detroit	137	(63%)
4	Elimination of government programs	74	(41%)	4	Nuclear destruction	136	(63%)
5	Depression, economy	71	(39%)	5	Depression, economy	131	(60%)
6	Nuclear destruction	70	(38%)	6	Possibility of war	130	(60%)
7	Possibility of war	61	(33%)	7	Elimination of government programs	92	(42%)
8	Discrimination	54	(30%)	8	Discrimination	75	(35%)
9	Political takeover	37	(20%)	9	Political takeover	68	(31%)

REFERENCES

Antonovsky, A. Health, stress, and coping: New perspectives on mental and physical well-being. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979.

Arling. G. Race, social reciprocity, and natural supports. Paper presented at the 31st Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Dallas, Texas, November, 1978.

Cox, H. Later Life: The realities of aging. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984.

Dancy, J., Jr. The black elderly: A guide for practitioners. Ann Arbor: Institute of Gerontology, University of Michigan - Wayne State University, 1977.

Dowd, J.J. And Bengtson, V.L. Aging in minority populations: An examination of the double jeopardy hypothesis, Journal of gerontology, 1978, 33, 427-436.

Eisdorfer, C. and Wilkie, F.L. Stress and behavior in aging: Issues in mental health and aging. Proceedings of the Conference on Reasearch in Mental Health and Aging, 1979, 1, 60-66.

Hill, R.A. A demographic profile of the black elderly, Aging, 1978, Nos. 287-288, 2-9.

Kahana, E. and Kahana, B. Innovative approaches to therapy with the aged. Paper presented at the 60th Annual Meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, Boston, April, 1983.

Martin, E.P. and Martin, J.M. The black extended family. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Seiden, R. Mellowing with age: Factors influencing the nonwhite suicide rate. International Journal of aging and human development, 1981, 13, 265-283.

Watson, W.H. Informal social networks in support of elderly blacks in the Black Belt of the U.S. Washington, D.C.: National Center on Black Aged, 1980.

Watson, W.H. and Maxwell, R.J. Human aging and dying: A study in socio-cultural gerontology. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977.